we idols of small gods

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we idols of small gods

by Skoll

Summary

There's a river in Louisiana where a god used to live. It never harmed the swimmers there, and never possessed the drowning; people thought it was polite, as local gods go.

Only, when Will Graham fell into the river, twenty years ago, he didn't come back out alone.

So here's Will, with an empathy disorder, an affinity for serial killers, and a god riding on his back, desperately trying to keep his head above water. The FBI needs Will functional, and for that, Will needs some outside help.

Enter Dr. Lecter...

(Or: a magical realism AU set in season 1.)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

> I don't know what I'm doing here. This practically wrote itself.
>
> This chapter's soundtrack comes from two Hozier songs: Arsonist's Lullaby, and In the Woods Somewhere. If you haven't heard them, I recommend them strongly.
>
> Anyway, enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will knows that Garret Jacob Hobbs is the Shrike beyond a shadow of a doubt when the man’s employment papers feel like frost against his skin.

There’s a question halfway off his tongue--an idle “Do you smell that?” asked of Dr. Lecter--when Will realizes exactly what he’s smelling: river water and clean metal. Will hears the rush of the stream clear as day, for all the hundreds of miles between him and the water. His fingertips ache against the improbable cool of the paper. Somewhere, deep below Will’s skin, he carries the hooks of his Rider; as he touches a finger against Garret Jacob Hobbs’ name, it feels like every single hook goes taut, pulled by a string he can’t see.

Will manages to scramble for an excuse under Dr. Lecter’s watchful eyes, spluttering out something about a missing address, but he’s honestly not sure he’s fooling anyone. It’s hard to lie, with his Rider at the reins.

…

By the time the car rolls to a stop outside the Hobbs residence, Will knows it’s too late.

The car’s door swings open under his hand. Will looks at the front door with his eyes, takes in its shape and color, and means to step towards it--but his feet lead away, his steps silent. He has just enough presence of mind to realize Dr. Lecter is following him like a shadow, but not enough control to turn the doctor back.

It’s a strange separation: Will’s body moves, and Will’s mind slips under. His legs stalk forward, his hand curls around the gun holster at his waist, and yet even as he moves, Will feels it all from a distance. His consciousness sinks under deep water, caught where it is cold and quiet, settled and still in a drowning current. He sees the day’s light and yet it cannot touch him in the depths. His mental absence and physical presence in this moment come to balance. The river rushes in his ears.

There is a window. In the window is a man’s back, his shoulders, his head. Will’s hands draw his gun. His fingers are steady. Will pulls the trigger: one single shot.

There is a man in the window, and then there is no longer one.

Dr. Lecter's eyes look more red than brown when Will turns; if Will were here, if Will were not deep in the river, he might think the man looked hungry.

"The family might need our help," Will says calmly, and Dr. Lecter nods. When Will turns, Dr. Lecter walks like his shadow, into the house that could not save the monster who loved it.

…

Will comes to with a shaking gasp in--where the hell is he? His motel room, from the look of it. His skin is dry, but he feels clammy, and this time not from sweat.

"It is 4:50 PM," comes Dr. Lecter's pleasantly accented voice. When Will actually looks around, it's hard to imagine how he missed the other man: Dr. Lecter is standing at the motel's lackluster excuse for a kitchen counter, transferring some sort of food onto plates. "You are in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and your name is Will Graham." The doctor sweeps towards Will gracefully, with a plate in each of his large, deft hands. "It is a grounding exercise, of sorts," Dr. Lecter continues, setting a plate in front of Will. "You seemed in need of solid ground."

A shiver goes down Will's spine. "Yeah," Will forces himself to say, after a moment. "I guess you could say that."

"Then I am happy I was here to provide it." The doctor's smile isn't wide, but it looks sincere. "Now, eat."

Force of habit makes Will pick up the silverware before him--genuine silverware, that is, and Will realizes now that the elegant china plate in front of him isn't exactly standard motel stock either--and pick at the food Dr. Lecter's provided. Much like breakfast, it's delicious. "This is now the second meal you've made me today, Dr. Lecter."

"I am always happy to cook for a friend."

A half-laugh shakes its way out of Will's throat, producing a startling, disused, dusty sort of sound. Will puts down his fork. When he darts a single glance towards Dr. Lecter's eyes, the doctor is looking back; their eyes catch, and the hooks under Will's skin rattle. Will looks away, quick as he can, and grips the table until the hooks still. "Why are you here, doctor? Still? After--" Will swallows, and doesn't finish his thought.

From the corner of his eyes, Will watches Dr. Lecter's face. The other man cuts another neat bite of his food, and lifts it gently to his thin lips. He chews, the motion efficient: there is something indulgent in the creases of his eyes when he swallows and begins to speak. "You may be the empath in the room," Dr. Lecter offers, "but your abundance does not make others deficient. I am a doctor. I flatter myself that I recognize when someone ought not be alone."

Nothing about the doctor's words or tone are scolding, and yet Will feels scolded. "Sorry," he says. Of course Dr. Lecter is here out of courtesy, here to look after Will. He wants to feel

indignant about *needing* that sort of care, but--well. Will went very deep, this time. With a slow breath to reorient himself, Will asks, "Garret Jacob Hobbs?"

"Is dead," Dr. Lecter says, evenly. "His wife was badly injured prior to our arrival--police officers on scene believe he may have seen our car approaching, and been driven to desperation. However, your intervention was timely. Garret Jacob Hobbs has a daughter--Abigail--and she informed us that your shot prevented her father from slitting her throat."

Something tight in Will's chest relaxes. With another glance at the edge of Dr. Lecter's face, Will asks, "Did anyone say whether Mrs. Hobbs was likely to survive?"

"She was entering surgery when we departed the hospital, but, from personal experience alone, I believe her prognosis to be fair, if her surgeon is sufficiently skilled. Time alone will tell."

Dr. Lecter dabs gently at his mouth with a cloth napkin, and Will wants--suddenly, fiercely, and terrifyingly--to open the other man up and crawl inside, and shield himself within the other man's impeccable calm, his unshakable stillness.

He shudders away from the thought as soon as he's had it. It doesn't come tinged with river water, but Will can never quite trust himself in the hours after.

It's his shame over his own gruesome imagination that makes Will open his mouth. "I probably owe you an explanation for all of--that," Will says, wincing faintly on the last word. He hates explaining this--still hasn't told anyone at the FBI besides Jack, who he *had* to tell--but what must the doctor be thinking, with Will pale and twitching at the table beside him, with only vague memories of *killing a man* a few hours prior?

It comes as a surprise, then, to hear the doctor's perfectly enunciated, "Quite to the contrary, I believe I understand perfectly." Will feels himself jerk upright, and looks sharply at Dr. Lecter's face, just avoiding his eyes. Dr. Lecter leans closer, and says, "You have a Rider, don't you, Will?"

Will feels--feels stripped to the bone, fileted open. "How did you--?"

"You are not the first person I've met who is tasked with carrying a god," Dr. Lecter says, perfectly steady.

The words come spilling up to Will's lips, like water from the lungs of the near-drowned: "A small god. It's--I only carry a small god." It's not what he means to say. He means to ask *how*, exactly, Dr. Lecter has met another carrier, when to the best of Will's knowledge there are maybe two hundred of them in total--or maybe he means to ask *am I that obvious?* even though he desperately doesn't want to know the answer. Instead the truth drips from his lips, and Dr. Lecter's gaze feels like a physical weight against his skin.

"And what small divinity has chosen you for its home, Will?"

Defenseless, Will tastes river water in his mouth, and remembers the sickening drag of the current, pulling him under. "The god of clean hunts," Will says, and clenches his hands so

tightly that his fingernails break open the skin of his palm, “clean catches, and--”

It physically hurts to keep the last two words in, but Will bites his tongue, and swallows the faint burst of his own blood. It’s easier to stomach the tang of iron than it would be to bear Dr. Lecter’s mistrust if Will told the whole truth. Will’s visibly unstable to begin with; no one wants to hear him call his Rider *the small god of clean kills*.

Thankfully, Dr. Lecter doesn’t press, despite the obvious way Will’s cut himself off. “You bear quite a weight, Will. Thank you for trusting me with it. Now please, do eat. Your food will grow cold, and I think you may be in need of the energy.”

Just this morning, Will sat at this same table, and told the doctor that he didn’t find him interesting.

Will picks up his fork, and, under Dr. Lecter’s watchful eyes, eats.

No one’s ever made him a liar this quickly before.

Chapter End Notes

If you got this far and enjoyed, please do drop me a comment. I've written exactly one other Hannibal fic before, and by fic I mean a single chapter of one fic; I'm still feeling out my characterizations and whatnot, so constructive feedback is welcome and helpful! Plus, I really love hearing from readers.

I don't quite know how long this story will wind up, since this chapter basically dragged itself out of me, without any forethought required on my part. If it's well liked, more will probably show up sooner rather than later. I'm weak for reader satisfaction, what can I say.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Okay, wow, color me floored by the response the first chapter of this fic got. Thank you all so much for your kudos, and for the lovely comments you left me. You know when I said that I was weak for reader satisfaction, and if this story was well liked, more would come faster? Here's another ~3k words, two days later. I'm ridiculous. Hopefully you all enjoy it.

This story has also developed an overarching plot now! It's a bit of a relief to know where we're going, and I'm really psyched to write it.

No Hannibal this chapter, as a heads up. Next chapter is all Will and Hannibal, to make up for it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Garret Jacob Hobbs' hunting cabin is a shrine.

It's a good thing that Jack is there with Will, when Will first steps into the attic. With Jack by his side--steady, dependable, stubbornly righteous Jack--it's easy to swallow back the rising water, to keep *Will* at the forefront. Under Jack's watchful gaze, Will winds his way through the maze of mounted bone, observing the macabre spectacle without letting himself become a part of it.

If he doesn't acknowledge his Rider--if he focuses very hard on being *Special Agent Will Graham*, academic dragged from his dimly lit classroom into this foreign, bloody place--then it's almost like he can't smell the worship in the air.

(*The small god of clean hunts, catches, and kills*--and Garret Jacob Hobbs made very, very clean kills.)

Jack, of course, isn't fooled by Will's very best attempts to hide. Will didn't think he would be, not really, but he had hoped Jack would have the common decency to see how hard Will is trying and let him have this one. Instead, Jack's voice is pointed as he looks from the mounted racks of antlers to Will himself, and says, "It seems like Garret Jacob Hobbs took his hunting seriously."

Will closes his eyes. "What do you want me to say, Jack?" He sounds exhausted to his own ears, despite the fact that it's barely mid-day, and it startles him; Will wasn't expecting to sound so tired.

It feels like--like there's more than one version of Will Graham standing in this room, sharing Will's skin and his lungs and his space, and he isn't at all sure which one is going to speak

when he opens his mouth. If he looks, will he see them all from the corners of his eyes, staring back from the distorted curves of bone?

“Do you think we’ll find the rest of those girls?”

An easy question--Jack’s version of a reprieve. “No,” Will says. “He was eating them, Jack. You know that.”

“He couldn’t have eaten every piece of them.”

Will shakes his head, and opens his eyes. Even though he doesn’t let himself look at Jack, he can feel Jack’s attention on him, chafing in its intensity. “Maybe he couldn’t eat everything, but he could use every piece. He *did* use every piece.” Will says it with quiet certainty, and lets himself dart a look at Jack. “Like you said, he took his hunting *very* seriously.”

“Was he hunting alone?”

It’s not the question Will was expecting, and the surprise startles him into an immediate, bewildered, “What?”

Jack steps closer towards Will. “Do you think someone else was helping him?”

Will can tell, from the emphasis Jack puts on the question, that his answer is supposed to be important somehow. Equally, though, he has no idea what Jack wants from him. His Rider isn’t one of Will’s dogs, sniffing out local squirrels; it doesn’t just helpfully point him towards any nearby serial killer, no matter how useful it would be if it did. “Who would be helping him?”

Uncertainty has Will pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose, and fixing his gaze on their frames. For all that Will doesn’t mean anything by it, Jack seems to take the nervous gesture as something more, because he steps closer again, like a hound scenting blood. “What did you make of Abigail Hobbs?”

It’s on the tip of his tongue to ask *who?* before Will remembers: the daughter. Dr. Lecter did mention her in passing. Apparently, Will may have saved her life. Now that he’s had some time to distance himself, he can recall half-memories of a slim, brown-haired girl. She was in Hobbs’ arms in the kitchen, Will thinks--and then crying outside, as medics wrapped her in a shock blanket and loaded her into an ambulance. Was there anything other than that? Did she speak to him? Did she blame him for killing her father, or thank him for saving her?

But there are no more memories to recall. If there were any other moments shared between the two of them, they fell like errant drops of water into Will’s river and were subsumed; there’s no use in Will trying to pull them back now.

It’s almost funny. She was Hobbs’ golden ticket, his most precious possession, and yet despite all the time Will spent fixated on Garret Jacob Hobbs, trying to grasp the shape of the man’s specter, ultimately she wasn’t important enough to Will to be memorable.

Still. Because Jack wants something from him, Will spends one moment thinking it through, letting himself take the shape of Garret Jacob Hobbs again. His bright eyed girl, joining him as an apprentice, sharing in this beloved, necessary, terrible part of his life--maybe even playing the part of his lure, the bait he sets to catch others like her, feeding effigies of herself to the pyre of his love for her--

“Having Abigail Hobbs as his assistant isn’t incompatible with his pathology,” Will offers.

It isn’t what Jack wanted, and Will can see that clear as day. “Who fired that bullet?” Jack asks, with the gravity of someone who’s just had a suspicion confirmed.

“My finger was on the trigger.” He’s digging his own grave, specially made to fit--but Will reminds himself that Dr. Lecter saw everything. It’s very possible that he’d be having this conversation with Jack soon enough, anyway.

“But did you pull it?”

Will laughs, and scrubs a hand across his eyes, dislodging his glasses. “The trigger was pulled, and it saved a life. Does it *matter*?”

Jack is very close now, a solid, disapproving wall. Will can feel the heat of the other man’s body between them. “When I brought you on to this case, and into the field,” Jack says, slowly, “you told me that your Rider was under control. Is your Rider under control, Will?”

Will makes himself meet the other man’s eyes, trying to show sincerity, but he can’t hold that gaze for long. Jack is so full of conviction and certainty--so very sure that the path he walks is justice, that anyone who fails to walk that path with him is erring--that he brims with it, lets it spill over into his eyes and his bearing and his very way of life. Maybe Jack is right, Will isn’t contesting that--Jack’s certainly more dedicated to justice than almost anyone else he’s met--but that conviction is *heavy*. Will can’t bear the weight of it.

“You can’t leash a god, Jack,” Will says, quietly and honestly. It’s nothing he didn’t try to tell Jack, back at Quantico. Maybe this time Jack will listen. “All you can do is point it in the right direction, and hold on. I am trying very hard to do that for you.”

Jack inspects Will’s face in silence, and then something in the other man settles, and he steps back. “And you’ll tell me, if your grip ever starts to slip?”

A part of Will--a very large part of Will--wants to laugh, and ask *what do you think you can do to stop a god, Jack?* but Will is not an idiot.

“You’ll be the first,” Will says.

For all the good that’ll do any of them.

...

When Alana and Jack corner Will in his own classroom--and Jack really is making a habit of doing that--Will is already in a bad mood.

His mood is down to a few simple problems. First, Will is getting a little tired of being an object of interest. Even without Jack's impromptu interrogation in the hunting cabin, the uncomfortable (and hopefully short-lived) congratulations Will's been receiving for his so-called "heroism" in Minnesota would have been enough to overwhelm him.

He's not used to being so *visible*. Sure, every year starts with one or two trainees who fixate on Will--either because they want him as a mentor or just because they want him, it really goes either way--but they're usually easy enough to discourage. Will knows his mind is a draw for some people, but if he just layers enough prickly sarcasm and politely phrased disdain over top of it, or carefully emphasizes just how dull academia is making him, it's usually enough to drive away all but the most persistent.

Now, though, now Will's not just an insightful but personally disliked professor; now he's the special agent who stopped a serial killer and saved a life with a single exceptionally placed bullet. People won't stop looking at him, or wanting to speak with him. It makes his skin crawl.

Secondly, though, most of his bad mood comes down to...to claustrophobia, for lack of a better word.

Every year, Quantico's halls see a great number of incredibly driven students, who are constantly pushing themselves to achieve their dreams; when those same students fail, the intensity of their heartbreak matches that of their drive. The whole place is a locus of dreams and dedication, failure and desperation, tears and sweat and sometimes blood: very powerful emotions, in short.

Given that, it's really no surprise that Quantico has its own small god.

All the students know about Quantico's local god. It lives on one of the outdoor training courses. There's a tradition, before major exams, for the students to go out and make it offerings for luck, or inspiration, or memory, the sort of gifts any small god can offer its adherents when it so chooses.

Only a very few of the students ever get anything in return for their offerings, and those that do usually only receive very minimal touches of divine influence, nothing lasting. It's a good deal, for a small god; the thing is well fed and lazy, more like a sprawling housecat than a divinity, and it's well known and beloved by students and staff alike.

Will's Rider *hates it*.

Predators are territorial by nature, and a predator rides Will. The instincts to hunt run high, when Will encounters another god--and when he refuses the hunt, the hooks twist in him in painful punishment.

Over the years, Will's gotten used to the feeling of those hooks; he's *had* to, since avoidance isn't possible. It's a well known fact that where people settle, gods follow. Greater divinities, at least, Will can see coming, and find ways around, since they advertise their presence like giant neon signs. But smaller gods? There's no predicting which place of tragedy or triumph might suddenly have *just* enough power to draw in the divine. Births, deaths, arguments,

moments of love and passion--hell, sometimes even a particularly bad rush hour can generate enough frustration to attract a very small divinity of its own.

So, faced with the options of taking off into the wilderness and living out his life where nothing and no one can bother him (tempting, but impractical), or putting up with the regular discomfort caused by brushing up against small gods, Will's chosen the later.

(There's a third option, he remembers, whenever the water rises high around him. His strong hands, steady; the power underneath them. A territory cleared of the *other*, only his. He knows he could. It would be so quiet, after.

When his Rider settles, and the water recedes, the implications of coming this close to committing deicide--of *trying to kill a god with his own bare hands*--are always too much.

Will pushes them down with the water, and forgets.)

Still, of every divinity he's ever encountered, the local god of Quantico tests Will's patience the most. When he isn't paying enough attention to hold it back--usually when he's too focused on a lecture, or when he stays too late at work--the river rises up in Will easily here. From the dark of the water, Will starts to think of Quantico's slow, gluttonous little god as easy pickings.

The hooks always rattle, when Will is at Quantico; they twist like leaves in the wind, tugging at something deeper and more tender than skin when they do.

Will's counter to that feeling--the only counter he's ever found that works--is to give his Rider space. Wolf Trap is his sanctuary. When Quantico's god becomes too much, Will retreats to his home: to his fields, and his dogs, and his stream. There are no other gods, out there, and it's settling, to be master of everything he sees. The closest Will ever comes to perfect calm is when he wades out into the stream with a fishing rod, and lets himself half-way sink into water both literal and metaphorical. He drifts there, and if he catches more fish than his skill alone can explain, it doesn't matter so long as he conscientiously throws back the extras.

Only, Will's barely seen his home the past few days. Ever since his supposedly triumphant return from Minnesota, Will has been all but trapped at Quantico by lectures and mountains of paperwork, since apparently, even dead, Garret Jacob Hobbs remains an inconvenience. When he does finally make it home at night, it's always long past sunset: too late to fish, or walk his land, or do much besides feed his dogs and dejectedly sip at some whiskey before falling asleep on his couch.

Of course, Will isn't sleeping well either. He keeps waking at night to the smell of cold metal and the strange conviction that something is on his land. The first few times it happened, Will dragged himself out of bed and went looking, but even his dogs couldn't find anything out of place. After about the third time searching, Will gave up. He's been ignoring it since then, as much as he can, just rolling over and going back to sleep. Still, Will knowing there's nothing there doesn't stop his Rider from waking him.

After about three days of this--of constant attention, and busywork, and his Rider's idiotic insistence waking him at night-- the hooks are all but tearing through Will every time they shake, and, to add insult to injury, people *won't stop congratulating him*.

So when Alana and Jack catch him after class--Alana sweetly, and then Jack like a bulldozer--and tell him that it's 'strongly recommended' Will get a psych evaluation before resuming active duty, Will's in no mood to wait and find out exactly who they recommend.

"Fine," Will says, snappishly. "But only if it's Dr. Lecter I'm speaking with."

There's only one doctor he's ever met who knew he was a carrier without Will having to explain, after all. If Will has to do this--and Jack's discussion about his grip a few days ago pretty much guarantees he does--then Dr. Lecter will do.

Alana's eyes widen, and she shoots a look at Jack. After a long moment, she says, "That's good to hear. Hannibal is an old mentor of mine. I was actually just about to recommend him to you."

"He recommended himself in Minnesota," Will returns, and it's only when he sees Alana's faint smile that he realizes that sounded less peevish than he meant it to. "Look. I'm tired. Can I go?"

"Of course, Will," Alana says gently, and steps aside.

Jack... doesn't.

"Jack," Will manages to get out, through gritted teeth. "What do you want." There's the beginning of a headache pounding behind Will's eyes; his tongue tastes brackish in his mouth.

Jack, incapable of not pressing, says, "You're going to have to be completely honest with Dr. Lecter, Will. He's meant to keep you from *carrying* all this alone."

The unsubtle allusion to Will's Rider--here, in the open, where anyone can hear, and *right next to Alana*--takes the breath out of him.

(Cold metal. The river rising.

In the space beneath his skin, Will claws, and writhes, and keeps his head above the water.)

"I already have been," Will says, and if Jack doesn't *back down*--

But Alana--perceptive, kind Alana--reads the tension in the air and frowns. "Jack," she says, softly, in protest.

And even if Jack was going to be inclined to make things difficult for Will--even if this interaction was going to degrade into useless posturing like their conversations sometimes do--he clearly doesn't feel that need with Alana. Jack steps aside, with a shrug. "I had to be certain," Jack offers, like it's an apology. "For my own peace of mind."

There are a hundred stupid, useless words on Will's tongue. The hooks under his skin feel like they might just tear loose.

"Goodnight Alana," Will says, picking retreat as his safest option. "Jack."

Will just--*just*--manages to get away, before cool water swallows him down, and he slips under.

...

Next thing Will knows, he's sitting on his own porch, soaking wet.

It's 9:30 PM. Will's car is parked in his driveway, undamaged. His dogs sprawl around him, panting happily, like they've been on a long run. Will's been in his stream, probably, but evidently his Rider didn't care about waders, or even changing out of his work clothes, because Will's slacks are drenched and heavy where they cling to his legs.

There's no blood on his hands. Will spends a long time looking.

"This could have been worse," Will tells Winston aloud. It's a thinly veiled excuse to say it, to hear it--and Will's not even fooling himself.

Four hours of Will's life are missing, and he won't get them back.

Will sits a long time outside.

He tells himself it's the windchill and the water making him shake.

Chapter End Notes

If you got this far and enjoyed, please do drop a kudos or a comment! I'm not always great at responding to comments (thanks generalized anxiety disorder) but I do love and cherish every one I get, and I write faster the more I think my audience is enjoying it, clearly.

Speaking of writing fast, chapter three is actually already completed. I was planning to give myself a buffer for this fic (i.e. not publishing a chapter until the next one is written), but I'm going out of the country on vacation for a week starting two days from now, and will most likely not be writing anything while away for obvious reasons. Do you guys have a strong preference for whether I post the next chapter before I go (meaning there may be more of a gap after I get back), or if I should wait until chapter four is written (which guarantees it will be at least a week, and more likely two to three, before the next chapter is published)? Let me know in the comments if you do, I'm fine going either way.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Alright y'all, I'm currently running on approximately 30 minutes of sleep and uploading this using deeply limited bus wifi, so fingers crossed I don't mess this up somehow. A couple people asked for chapter three before I went on vacation, so I'm trying to squeak this in under the wire.

I was going to type up some notes about the overall way this story will stick with (and diverge from) the show, but bus wifi is not going to give me time to do that. So, quick version: I swear to god we'll be out of the equivalent of episode 2 sooner rather than later. It is not generally going to take me three chapters to get through a single ep, I promise; everyone was just so talkative.

Next chapter will get into actual murder content, and we're going a bit astray from the show, with an original killer. Sorry Eldon, we all love the creepy mushroom murders, but right now this story's Will would get nothing from them. In general, expect this fic to include a lot of picking and choosing show content based on its relevance here, with original stuff wound in when that would be more helpful.

Ugh. I hope that was at all coherent. I'll edit this note later.

Enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dr. Lecter's office is, somehow, even more ridiculous than Will thought it would be.

He'd call it pretentious, but that's not precisely what he means. The office, with its immaculate furnishings, shelves of perfectly organized books, and carefully positioned artwork, is more full of *pretense* than *pretension*. It's a design, and a deliberate one; Will thinks that if he let the pendulum swing here, it would show him long moments of intense calculation, as Hannibal Lecter, the man, constructed the perfect frame to display *Doctor* Hannibal Lecter, the psychiatrist and sophisticate.

The construction did its work--Dr. Lecter looks more in control in this space than Will ever saw him in Minnesota, and that's saying something. Here, Dr. Lecter moves sinuously, fluidly, as he crosses behind his desk. The paper he pushes across his desk to Will slides neatly, and then comes to a stop, perfectly oriented towards Will.

Will scans the paper quickly, and then pauses, and reads it again. "You rubber stamped me," Will says, just a shade shy of incredulous.

Because the truth is that here, contrasted against all this calculated perfection, Will's pretty sure that it's never been more obvious how much of a mess he is.

Will's seen the bags under his eyes; his reflection in the mirror this morning made it clear that his exhaustion's not pulling any punches. Worse, he knows how twitchy he is. Ever since two nights ago--since he woke up, wet and absent a few hours' memories--it's like he's been running on high alert. Everything startles him. He can't keep still. Halfway through a lecture today, he turned to ask a nearby student to stop tapping distractingly, and then realized that the sound that was bothering him was coming from his own fingers, fluttering uselessly against his desk.

Yet here's Dr. Lecter, handing him his completed eval before Will's even opened his mouth.

The doctor leans forward, lacing his fingers together before him; Will half expects him to retract the evaluation form towards himself, but of course he doesn't. "Forgive me for the presumption," Dr. Lecter begins, smoothly, "but I believe I understand you at least well enough to say that this form would be an impediment to open conversation between us, should I have left it incomplete."

"And you think giving me what I'm here for will incentivize me to stay and talk?"

Much like Jack, Dr. Lecter seems to have the power to make his gaze palpable; Will feels it now. "*Is* this what you're here for?"

Will huffs a laugh, and lets his eyes drift to the other man's profile, where he can safely see the doctor's face without meeting his eyes. "Fair point. No. I'm not here for the evaluation."

Dr. Lecter smiles, faintly. "Good. So let us dispense with the trivialities," this with an elegant sweep of one hand towards the form, "and get to the meat of the matter. What does bring you here today, Will?"

"I, uh." Now that he tries to say them aloud, the words catch in Will's throat. What *is* he doing here? He got the form--that's all he needs to call Jack off. Is he really going to willingly talk to a psychiatrist, and an FBI-recommended psychiatrist, no less?

Will pauses, almost hoping that in the moment's stillness his body will just walk over, pick up the form, and walk away, without him needing to consciously decide to do so. Why shouldn't it? If his body is already walking around without his say-so, why shouldn't it benefit him, every once in a while?

But Will remains still.

With another huff of breath, Will instead makes himself sit down, facing the doctor's desk. "I don't think I need a psychiatrist, even if Jack does."

Dr. Lecter tilts his head ever so slightly, then offers, "Jack needed a psychiatrist to sign that form, and one did. Absent further need of a psychiatrist, I could simply offer a friendly ear. Or perhaps, provide a few answers."

So Will is being excruciatingly obvious, then. Good to know. Ignoring the faint sting to his pride, Will asks, “You said you knew another carrier?”

“Yes. In my youth, I knew a carrier quite well, for a time.”

“And how long did their god Ride them?”

“A little under three years.”

It’s...not what Will hoped to hear. Statistically, he understands exactly how absurd an outlier he is--though carriers are vanishingly rare, their experiences are generally fairly well documented, in this day and age. But some part of Will was still hoping--

Dr. Lecter’s low voice interrupts Will’s train of thought when he asks, “How many years have you spent carrying your divinity’s weight, Will?”

“Ah,” Will says, and adjusts his glasses just to have something to do with his hands. “Twenty years. Twenty one in November.”

Over half of my life, he doesn’t say aloud. He’s sure Dr. Lecter can do the math.

Dr. Lecter blinks once, expression thoughtful, but that’s the limit of his outward reaction. Will’s just glad he didn’t recoil, or suddenly look at Will with pity--or, worse, suddenly look at Will with awe. It happened once or twice, back before Will wised up about telling people. There’s not exactly another story out there like Will’s.

“Well,” Dr. Lecter says, after a moment. “If you were seeking to compare your experiences with those of another carrier, I am sorry that I cannot offer you a perfect analog. That said, my insight--whatever little I have of it--is yours to call upon.”

“Did they ever--,” Will makes himself pause. He needs to start with easy questions; he needs to not ask *an FBI recommended psychiatrist* about whether his childhood acquaintance ever felt they were slipping into becoming more a carrier than a person. Easy questions. “Who was their Rider?”

“A small god of truth.”

“And where did their Rider find them?”

Dr. Lecter speaks softly. “She was walking in her family’s gardens, I believe.”

It’s so easy to picture, now: a beautiful young girl, surrounded by flowers. In Will’s mind, he sees her reaching out, gently touching petals--and then, with one curiously outstretched finger, finding something else there, something divine. He pictures that vastness reaching back into her, and choosing. He sees them blending together gently, easily. If there’s any disturbance between the two, it’s minimal, and purposeful: like the disturbance caused by a bird’s wing, which lifts the bird higher in its wake. Just a sweet faced child and a small, pure divinity, transforming easily.

There's no violence, in Will's vision of it: no sharp impact into ice cold water, no clenching pain as gasping breaths fail to find air, no dizzy disorienting current to batter skin and shatter calm. No vicious struggle, no clawing hands, no blood. No predators.

Will closes his eyes.

"I'm sorry to waste your time, Dr. Lecter," he says, "but I don't think I have much in common with the carrier you knew." He feels terribly distant from himself, in this moment, but at least for once the distance is purely organic: Will is disappointed. Even though disappointment requires expectations--even though *Will should know better*--something about the worldly, self-assured doctor sitting in front of him almost made Will think he could help.

"No, Will, I am the one who is sorry." Will opens his eyes at that, darting a look at the doctor. To his surprise, Dr. Lecter's expression is very much a match for Will's own: perfectly genuine disappointment. "You came to me looking for answers, and I could not provide them."

"Why do you *care*?" Will doesn't mean to ask the question, but it slips out nevertheless. Scrambling to correct his own mistake, Will stumbles through the words, "I didn't mean--I just--"

Dr. Lecter raises a hand, and Will goes quiet. "No, I think it is a fair question. You've made it clear that you are not seeking the services of a psychiatrist, and so I cannot tell you I would feel the same for any of my patients. Even if I did consider you a patient, I don't believe that would be true. You are an interesting man, Will, and one who has spent a long time grappling alone with a weight the vast majority of us will never be able to imagine, much less bear. I find it remarkable that, despite it, you stand here before me, whole. I would like to see you continue standing. If I can offer a hand to steady you, or a light to show the path before you, I believe that I would very much like to do so."

Confronted with that sort of honesty--personal, almost intimate honesty, no less--Will finds himself frozen. One part of him badly wants to defuse the moment, to make a cheap joke about being seated, or about how Dr. Lecter needs to get his eyes checked if Will's current mess looks whole to him, or about something, *anything* to make Dr. Lecter stop *seeing* him.

Another part of him wants to just...linger. To freeze this instant perfectly in time and step outside of it; to give himself the distance he needs to dissect it without running the risk of dissecting *himself* in the process. Will wants to prod at this moment like a tongue prods at a sore tooth.

Instead he breathes, and Dr. Lecter watches him, and time continues moving onward stubbornly, like a slow, honeyed drip.

Finally, Will makes himself ask, with his voice forced light, "What are you offering me, doctor?"

"My friendship, if you'll have it," Dr. Lecter says, casually, like he doesn't feel the weight of his own words between them. "And if you won't--perhaps dinner, one day next week?"

A second, and then Will breaks into startled laughter. It feels good, feels clean. The laughter shakes through Will, and for the first time in days, he doesn't mind the shaking. "I'm going to have to stop trying to guess what you'll say next," Will says, once he can get words out again. "I'm not used to people throwing me curveballs so often."

Dr. Lecter smiles, and the warmth of it reaches his eyes. "Is that a yes to dinner, then?"

Will stops himself from saying *that's a yes to everything*, but it's a near thing.

Chapter End Notes

You know the drill: I really love getting feedback and comments. Very sleepy author appreciates you all very much.

Since I'm going to be out of the country for a week, and then will be starting a new job shortly after returning, it may be in the range of 2 weeks to a month before the next chapter is out. Just a warning, because I've been churning this fic out so far at a pace I won't be able to sustain forever, but I don't want anyone thinking I've abandoned the fic or something!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

> This chapter has been sitting half finished on my computer for over a year, but some things (a pandemic! having a kid!) distracted me from it for a very long time. Recently I figured what the hell, and finished it. If people still want to read it, here it is!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Will gets two quiet days.

After his session with Dr. Lecter on Friday, Will drives home, feeds his dogs, sits down on his couch--just for a moment!--and falls asleep.

He sleeps like a dead thing, and wakes the next morning to the whining of his dogs. It doesn't occur to Will until he's standing outside, muzzily waiting for his dogs to finish their business and turn back up, that he actually slept through the night for the first time in days.

His good luck continues. Will goes on a long run with his dogs, tinkers with the decrepit boat motor sitting in his garage, fishes. He cooks what he catches, eats well. He sleeps long, deep, and uninterrupted. For two whole days, Will doesn't see another person. The hooks in him settle; the water level, as it were, falls.

"Was this you?" he asks the empty air of his kitchen on Sunday night. His dogs mill happily around his feet as he cooks, hoping for scraps. The air inside is warm and cosy, even as wind rattles against the windows. Will feels *good*, strange as that is. He feels like himself, untouched for the moment by any other minds. It almost seems more likely that a divinity is involved somewhere, than that he's getting to just...have a good weekend, for mundane reasons.

The kitchen stays silent, save for the panting of his dogs. If Will's Rider is behind his restful weekend, it gives no sign.

He gets two quiet, perfect days.

Then on Monday, a crime scene comes to him.

…

When the dead woman finds Will, he doesn't get any warning.

He would, anywhere else. Even before the dogs could bark at the presence of an intruder, he'd have felt her at home; the hooks in him have been calm enough the past few days that he'd have noticed the faint fluttering long before she came close. By the time she made her

way to his home, Will would have had time to decide whether he wanted to run or handle it. He thinks of that occasionally, in the days after the mess. Thinking of getting into his car and peeling off, leaving her behind--or meeting her on his porch, with his gun in hand, fully prepared--it becomes a sort of pleasant escapist fantasy he falls back on in stressful moments.

But this is not what happens, because she finds him in Quantico.

Will's hooks always rattle in Quantico; the lines in him are always taut; he doesn't get a warning.

Or, and this is maybe the worst part, he *does* get a warning--but only moments before everything spirals out of his control, too little and much too late. Will's just finished a lecture, when the air takes on a faint tinge of metal and river water. For a second, he pays attention--he spares a thought for his Rider, he wonders--and then his students *stand* and start *applauding*, and any concern for the scent in the air vanishes under mortification.

"Please," Will says, faintly, to a classroom full of students too busy putting on a display to listen, "don't do that." It was a good lecture, fine--Will's been feeling fired up today, probably a consequence of being well rested for the first time in ages, and everyone loves it when he lectures on the Chesapeake Ripper--but nothing deserving of a standing ovation. Will had been distantly hoping that his five minutes of fame might have been dying down, but apparently he's not that lucky.

A few of the students seem to notice the lackluster reception to their adulation, and the clapping wanes slightly. Will feels their eyes on him. With his own eyes fiercely focused on a wall over their heads, none of them can make eye contact, but he can still see them clearly enough. He watches uncertainty and awkwardness creep slowly onto their faces. Good. Maybe that will keep them from doing this again in the future; maybe they'll focus on what Will's here to teach them, and not on Will himself.

It takes a few long moments for silence to fall. Will knows what they're waiting for: a polite thank you for the applause, or at least an acknowledgement. Feeling needled, and uncomfortably exposed, Will instead says, sharply, "Class dismissed."

It would be an overstatement to claim that he barrels out of the lecture hall, but only just. Will doesn't wait for questions, or for any awkward attempts to break the silence. If the air feels cold--if his mouth tastes brackish--he puts that down to how very desperately he wants to be anywhere else.

When a hand closes on his wrist, just as he steps through the doors of the lecture hall, for a single stupid moment Will's certain it's a student, trying to--what, drag him back and explain? Make him accept all that fawning focus on him? He has no idea.

Will spins on the person, gritting out a harsh, "*Don't*--" between his teeth--

And meets the pale, glazed eyes of a corpse.

Only this corpse isn't like every other one Will's seen in recent memory, rictus-still and slowly rotting. The body in front of him could almost--almost--pass for living. Its grip on

Will's wrist is cold but strong; the fingers move and shift with Will, keeping him pinned. The eyes, for all that their pupils are blown wide, for all that they can't *really* be seeing, still track his movement.

It takes Will longer than it should to realize he's looking at a god.

The river roars.

Or...something roars. There's a sound in the air, a harsh thing that Will doesn't recognize--but he's aware, distantly, that his chest and throat are vibrating with some sort of sound. He feels a grimace shape on his face, feels his lips pull back to bare his teeth. A small part of him, distant from the moment, wonders what he thinks he's going to do with those teeth; is he planning to bite a chunk out of a corpse and hope it kills a god?

But with the water rising in him, with the world cold and clean and sharp in his eyes, Will's teeth feel sharp. His hands feel powerful. "Let go," Will says, calmly. "I won't ask again."

The dead thing parts its lips and speaks.

The sound is terrible: somehow thin and heavy, powerful and powerless, all at once. It's both the rasping, choked product of stiff vocal cords and the uncomfortable weight of divinity made audible, both the death knell of a living voice and the clear otherworldly chime of a being that will never know death. He feels the words as much as hears them; they seem to reverberate down into his bones, as much presence as sound.

"Help," says the god in the dead woman, both a rasping plea and the heavier wave of compulsion behind it--

And every light goes out at once.

....

Will plunges.

There's a dizzying spin--air, a frigid parting of water around him, sinking pressure. Will lunges up with all his strength, chasing the air, but he can't reach it. The water pulls him. He rushes along, caught. From behind, something hard strikes his back; air trickles helplessly from between his lips. The world flips sickeningly, and Will's chest burns. Again, he kicks for the surface, for air--if he can just breathe in--

He's dragged further down; the sunlight dwindles; in the depths, Will's lungs clamp tight, and he knows that any moment now, he's going to breathe in whether he wants to or not, and it's going to kill him.

It didn't happen like this, Will thinks, stupidly, but then the thought catches and sticks. It *didn't*. He remembers, clear as day, the fall, the unbreakable catch of the current, the ribbons of his own blood spreading in the water--

But he didn't drown then, and he *isn't* going to drown now.

Will gathers his strength and kicks again for the surface. He slices through the water like a knife. The water grows brighter, and the current diminishes, and Will pushes forward, lunging up towards the sweet relief of air--

And strikes ice, thick on the surface of the water.

Whether it's the shock or the impact that drives the last of the air out of his lungs, Will doesn't know. Feebly, Will hits the ice, hoping against hope that it might buckle; he might as well be trying to punch through a concrete wall, for all it gives.

He's going to die here.

Without thinking, Will finds himself laughing. Water pours into his mouth, his throat, his lungs, and still his body shakes with awful, involuntary laughter. He's going to die here. He's going to die here, in *his river*. How many times has he slid down into these depths, powerful and cool and distant--and this time it's going to kill him? This is going to be how he dies?

The water is fire in his lungs; Will's ears ring, and his vision dims.

Will closes his eyes.

And then, suddenly, something plunges down into the water with him--a hand grasps tightly around his--and Will finds himself being pulled bodily out of the water.

The air is a revelation. Somehow, Will doesn't need to choke up the water he swallowed; it slides from him easily, and the cool evening air fills the spaces it left. With every gasp he takes, the burning in his chest dims.

Almost sick with gratitude, Will opens his eyes to thank his rescuer--

And finds himself meeting his own blue eyes.

There's a...a *vastness*, an otherness, behind the blue that isn't there when Will looks in the mirror in the morning, but those are *Will's* eyes. The hands that grasped his and lifted him from the water are familiar because they're *his*, right down to their calluses and rough patches.

With a sudden, shaking certainty, Will looks down further, looks at the hand clasped in his own fingers--looks at the body that struggled against the water and the inevitability of drowning, this body that he's thought was his all along--and finds himself looking at the sallow, pallid skin of a corpse.

Without any particular intent, Will feels his mouth--the dead woman's mouth--slide open. Her dry, sealed lips part with a bloodless tear; her tongue is a heavy and useless weight. Disgusted and trapped, Will pleads, in what is at once a grim rasp and a clear chime, "Help--"

....

--and then Will is himself again. His skin is warm, and living. His heart beats in his chest. He's alive. He's *alive*.

He might vomit.

“Oh mercy,” Will says, faintly. He’s never been so glad to hear his own voice leaving his mouth.

The urge to run--possibly all the way home, with how jittery Will feels--is strong, but so is the grip the god has on his wrist. All the strength Will felt earlier, the strength that made him confident that he could challenge a god, is gone. Will could probably get it back if he needed to, but. Well. He’d need to sink back into the water voluntarily to get to it. Right now, Will’s not sure he could.

He looks at the corpse, from the outside this time. “Why did you do that?”

“Help,” the god and the dead woman say, together.

The spasm of laughter that breaks free from Will hurts. “I don’t know what else I was expecting. How am I supposed to help you?”

The lights go out.

…

Will plunges into the water, taking a sudden shocked breath that sends water straight into his aching chest, and he can’t do this again, he can’t--

With furious determination, Will reaches out--with his hands, with his mind, with anything he’s got--and focuses on making this illusion, or vision, or whatever it is *stop*--

…

He comes back to himself with a flinch.

“*Stop doing that*,” Will says. His hands are clenched into fists. He may not remember clenching them, but hitting the god in front of him is starting to sound pretty good, even if all it’ll get him is bruised knuckles. “Why me? What do you need from me?”

“Help,” the god says, and then, when Will is giving up all hope of getting a clear answer, it gives him two more words. “Hunt. Retribution.”

“Hunt *who*?” If it were just a human body in front of him, Will would know the answer; he’s very good at hunting murderers, as a rule. The body is simple. Throwing a god into the equation makes it all much more complex. There’s no way a god rode a corpse here just to ask him to avenge a dead human, any more than a hurricane would suddenly stop raging to ask after a dead ant. If it would just tell him what it wants--

But all the god in the dead woman says is, “Help,” and as it speaks, the lights flicker.

“Yes,” Will says, quickly, before he can be thrown into another vision of drowning. “Yes, alright, I’ll do it, just. Please stop.”

And then--

There is something pressing against Will's sternum, a pressure that makes itself indistinguishable from pain. Pressing against, insistently--and then--Will's breath catches, his world contracts--pressing *through*. Slowly, dully. Not like a blade--Will's been stabbed before, he'd prefer that--but like an erosion. The force of water can wear down rock, given millenia; but Will is only flesh, and this is more than water. He feels his fingers scrabble uselessly at his chest, looking for a wound that isn't there.

It presses.

Will parts.

In that moment of excruciating openness, the pressure-pain twists, settles, and then disappears. In its place, Will feels a new hook catch beneath his skin, one much heavier than all the others, and much, much older.

The god in the dead woman smiles as the vow settles into place between them, baring pale teeth in sickly bruised gums. “Hunt,” it says, one final time.

Then the weight in the air clears, and the dead woman is just a dead woman again, emptied of the divine. Like a puppet with its strings cut, she goes from upright to perfectly lax in an instant. Will tries to catch her when she starts to fall, and only barely manages to lower her to the ground rather than drop her. She’s had enough happen to her; Will wants to give her what little dignity he can, now.

“I’m sorry,” he tells her, because it feels as though someone should. Will’s carried a god for most of his life. He’d hate to keep carrying it after.

Will gets a moment’s silence--just a single moment, to try and process everything that’s just happened--before it’s interrupted by the voice of a trainee, asking, “Do you need help, professor?”

One of his students asks that. One of his students, because apparently his entire class of over-achieving hyper-driven bright-eyed and bushy-tailed prospective FBI agents has been standing maybe ten feet behind him this whole time. His students, who saw a small god compel him into making a vow of retribution.

His students, who almost certainly will dig into the mystery he’s just presented them with, and almost certainly will not stop until his whole sordid past comes tumbling out, Rider and all.

Will spares himself another single moment to close his eyes and breathe.

Then, because time stops for no man and certainly not for Will Graham, he opens them again. “One of you, go get Jack Crawford. And move back! This is a crime scene.”

Chapter End Notes

Here's the same disclaimer I put on my other recent work: I'm a parent to a baby who doesn't sleep very well, and I work full time, so finding time to write is a bit of a struggle. That said, this story is not abandoned. If that changes, I'll let you know.

Comments are always appreciated!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!